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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a comprehensive first grade language curriculum which views the acquisition of literacy as a whole language process. The paper explains how to configure program elements to provide direct instruction, time-on-task, and self-directed learning. The manner, timing, method of instruction, and specifics of the contribution of each component to the program are explained in detail. The methodology of instruction, materials used, and techniques of classroom management which facilitate and support instruction are discussed. Secondary program elements, including projects and units of study, which complete the overall language curriculum, are presented. The paper includes excerpts from the children's work to illustrate the methodology and results. (RS)

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Implementation of a Whole Language Approach to Literacy Acquisition

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Implementation of a Whole Language Approach to Literacy Acquisition

ABSTRACT

This article describes a comprehensive first grade language curriculum which views the acquisition of literacy as a whole language process. It explains how to configure program elements to provide direct instruction, time-on-task, and self-directed learning. The major components of the curriculum--reading, writing, literature--are integrated into the program according to research-based rationales for their use. The manner, timing, method of introduction, and specifics of the contribution of each component to the program is explained in detail. The methodology of instruction, materials used, and techniques of classroom management which facilitate and support instruction are discussed. Secondary program elements, including projects and units of study, which complete the overall language curriculum are presented. Excerpts from the children's work illustrate the methodology and results.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH TO LITERACY ACQUISITION

INTRODUCTION

This article describes a whole language approach to literacy acquisition used in two consecutive first grade classes from September, 1983 to June, 1985. The efficacy of this approach is documented in a study (Freeman and Freeman, 1987) which compared levels of progress in passage comprehension, as measured by an informal reading inventory, among students in four first grade classes in the same elementary school. Our findings indicated that a whole language approach which integrated reading/writing instruction with a strong literature component enables children to read independently at a higher level, and to be instructed at the same or higher levels, than those children taught by traditional basal-based approaches. Despite excellent results, and school/community support, the program ended when I was reassigned to a reading support position in the district.

Since reading and writing are natural extensions of the language facility children demonstrate at school entrance (Carroll, 1965; Goodman, 1972; Freeman, 1977), whole language approaches to reading/writing acquisition are the current focus of early childhood

educators (IRI Position, 1986; Joint Statement, 1986). However, contacts with teachers indicate confusion about how to conduct effective reading acquisition programs which do not rely on commercially produced packages of materials. This article is intended to clarify content, procedures, and methods for implementing a more natural approach to literacy acquisition in a typical public school first grade.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

The major program components are reading, writing, and literature; speaking and listening are subsumed by these components. Since the acquisition of listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities is not, as is frequently suggested, linear or hierarchical, and language processing is dependent on the development of sufficient supportive cognition, the program is designed to promote the simultaneous and mutually supportive development of components and underlying processes.

Children learn to read by interacting with material that is meaningful. The most natural form of text and one that accounts for prior knowledge and familiar syntactic patterns is the written form of children's language. For these reasons, the body of text for the initial weeks of the program is derived from narratives dictated by small groups of students. As students become more consistent readers of their own dictated text, easy but meaningful story books are introduced. Direct instruction time and engaged reading time

is then shared by dictated text and supplementary text.

Students write their own thoughts from the outset of the literacy acquisition process. The use of invented spelling (Temple, Nathan, and Burris, 1982) enables students to understand that they can write anything they can say. They combine their knowledge of printed letters, letter-sound correspondence, and story structure to become fluent writers. The writing and reading processes are mutually supportive from the earliest stages of literacy.

Literature serves many purposes in the early formation of thinking and language structure. Literature is secondary only to personal experience for promoting concept formation and vocabulary development. It provides students with the knowledge of story structure essential for successful reading comprehension. The literature program provides daily opportunities to accomplish these purposes, as well as for sustained listening experiences and discussion of story ideas.

Introduction of Program Components

The three basic components--reading, writing, and literature--are introduced the first day of school. The group gathers at the front of the room to discuss summer activities and the excitement of starting first grade. This gives the students a chance to speak and to listen to each other, and enables the teacher to assess the students' language ability. The discussion can be lead, by teacher

questioning, to a common topic. The teacher then explains that she can write down some of their ideas and make a story about the topic. A narrative based on the continuing discussion is then elicited from the students and written on chart paper as spoken by the students. The teacher says each word as it is written and reads each sentence aloud before another sentence is added. The narrative is a group of sentences on a single topic. Even though it lacks the necessary structure (Gordon and Braun, 1983), for the purpose of the students' identification it is called a story. Two examples of four-sentence first stories follow:

1) On our first day in first grade we read a story. We learned names. We got our names down from the board. We put the names on our desks.

2) When we went to school we drew a summer picture. We went out for recess and we played on the bars. We played on the swings. We practiced writing our names.

The group reads the narrative aloud several times. The teacher rewrites the narrative on writing paper and makes multiple copies before the students return to school the next day. Each student receives a copy to keep throughout the week. The narrative serves as the basic text material; shared experience makes the text memorable.

Individually written journals are kept in spiral-bound notebooks. The students write their names on the covers and turn to the first blank page. They are encouraged to write their own ideas. Since this is a new concept, the teacher models the expected behavior. Pretending that the chalkboard is a notebook page, the teacher shows the students how to think about what to write, how to break each word into its component sounds, and how to use the letter-sound associations learned in kindergarten to get their ideas down. The teacher elicits an idea or two from the students and they break the words into sounds, cooperatively. The letters standing for the sounds the students actually identify are written on the chalkboard. Examples range from initial consonants only to consonants in initial, medial, and final positions. Some students include vowel sounds. Some examples are:

I P N D S N S

I pld n d swgz n sldz

I plad n da swigs en slidz.

Some students are then able to decide on a phrase or sentence to write in their journals. Others copy any print they see in the room. The teacher circulates, eliciting phrases and sentences and helping individuals break familiar words into sounds and write the letters that stand for the sounds.

At least one story book is read to the class during the first morning. The students sit on the floor, facing the teacher's low chair, to listen to the story. The book is held so the students can see both words and pictures. The students are involved in the progress and outcome of the story as the teacher asks them, at salient points in the story, to predict what will happen. There is always a post-reading discussion based on the predictions, the story's plot and characters. The teacher probes to encourage inferencing, based on convergent and divergent thinking, and making judgments.

In this way, the program components are introduced the first day of the school year.

FUNCTION AND INTEGRATION OF PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Reading

The class is divided into four randomly selected reading groups. The children come to the reading table with their individual copies of the group language experience story. The story is read aloud cooperatively and repeatedly with all students and the teacher participating. The teacher expects the students to look at the words being spoken and explains that it is necessary to look at the words to read. As the group becomes more familiar with the story and more assured in their repetition, the teacher drops her voice level. The teacher then asks if anyone is ready to read the story alone and encourages a student who is likely to succeed. As the student reads, the teacher supports the process by reading along with the

student if there is any break in the student's fluency. Usually the student reads the first sentence, and needs help with the second or third sentence. The teacher drops out if the student can finish the story alone. After the first volunteer, most others are eager to try. The process is slow at the beginning, but by the end of the first week, many students are enthusiastic about reading aloud and are excited by their success.

This process is continued with all four groups every school day. Within the first few weeks the randomly selected groups of students are readjusted to reflect individual student's readiness for the reading task and ability to progress.

At the end of the first week, each group generates another story based on a common experience the class is having. For example, one year we observed signs of autumn by examining the leaves of the various local trees and learned to identify trees by overall shape and characteristics of the bark and leaves. The ongoing nature of the topic provided repetition from week to week, and the commonality between stories supported flexible regrouping when it was desirable. One of the groups generated the following two stories in successive weeks:

1) We are learning about trees. Trees grow in the forest. Trees have different colored leaves. Trees have bark on their trunks.

2) We are taking leaves off trees and learning about them. We are going to press them down on wax paper. Leaves make sugar. It is food for the tree.

Each group tells a new story each week. There are four stories, usually on the same topic, being used in the class simultaneously. Each story is used for four or five days, depending on the distractions of the school schedule. The day the story is dictated, the students reread it from the chart on which it is written. The rest of the week it is read from individual copies.

To support familiarity with each story, the students copy one sentence of the story each day. On the day the students receive their individual story copies, at the end of each group's reading sessions at the table, the teacher underlines the first sentence on each student's paper with a colored marking pen. The teacher models the way to write each sentence. An additional sentence from the story is written on successive days, each distinguished from the others by underlining with a different color. As with all initial learning, first graders need support, encouragement, and constructive suggestion. Within a very few weeks, writing the sentence repetitively (four times) is just part of the morning's routine.

The copying exercise is an important academic component of the program. It facilitates the teaching of the concepts of sentence

and word. It teaches students to leave a space between words as they write. It enables the teacher to model and correct handwriting on an individual basis in meaningful contexts. It models continuous writing for students, i.e., continuing the sentence on the next line. It reinforces the reading process; as the teacher checks each student's paper, the student is expected to read the sentence aloud.

The language experience stories provide the bulk of text material for the acquisition of reading during the first two to four months of the first grade year. When a group demonstrates that the story is not sufficient for continued progress in the reading process, it is supplemented by introducing meaningful printed stories (Reading Unlimited, Levels 2-4, 1976).

The final group stories, told in mid-December, indicate development in several aspects of generating a story: sentence structure, word choice, and cohesiveness. Students generate the introductory sentence without prompting. They provide a concluding sentence for closure. Some groups title their stories. An example follows.

About Christmas

It is getting close to Christmas. We will get lots of presents. I like that part the best. Some of us go to our grandma's and grandpa's on Christmas Eve and some go on Christmas Day, and some don't go at all. We like to decorate the Christmas tree.

Writing

By consistently modeling writing for students, even the reluctant ones soon learn that they can write anything they can say by listening for the sounds in each word and writing the corresponding letters. The students are expected to write thoughts and experiences in their journals every day. In addition, the students are given shape books, books cut in animal, tree, or object shapes, made from drawing paper with colorful construction paper covers. Each book has four pages on which students can write a story and draw illustrations. A typical story, early in the year, is a narrative written in the first person that describes an experience--real or imagined. For example:

We Guot (got) a rid (ride) on a teradeir (tractor)

We Gud (got) a pampie (pumpkin)

and We Guot (got) to peik (pick) apple's (apples) too

We Gud (got) Dounus (doughnuts) and Cauiedr (cider).

As the students become comfortable with the writing process, using invented spelling and developing a fluent writing style, we begin to discuss story structure (Gordon and Braun, 1983)--the elements of a story--and identify good storytelling strategies in the literature we read. The students are encouraged to think of stories, just as real authors do, and to write stories like those we read

in books. They are reminded that in a good story something happens --the characters have to solve a problem. They frequently begin by setting up a fictional situation and reverting to a narrative, as in this story example, written in a book shaped like a turkey. Translated into standard English it reads:

> Hi! I'm Georgie. I'm being hunted by hunters. They are going to kill me. We eat turkey. Turkey is good.

Soon the students learn to sustain a story from beginning to end.

The Little Tee Pot
(Tea)

Wanc (once) a pon (upon) a tim (time) there

Was a tee (tea) pot it mad (made) hot coco. (cocoa)

it got pot (put) a wae (away) for a

yer. (year) it got takin (taken) out a gin (again)

it forgot hoo (how) too (to) mak (make) hot coco. (cocoa)

theen (Then) it remebrd (remembered) it was happe. (happy)

Stories are shared with peers during the writing process. Stories are read to small groups who question the author to help make the story more complete and point out weaknesses for revision. At other

times, stories are read to the whole class.

Revision, at this stage, is viewed as a developmental process. Progress is measured by comparing different stories over time, rather than by rewriting individual stories, as explained by Hink (1985). For example, the first of the following two stories by one student was written on January 23, the second on April 17.

Winter Fun with Snow and Ice

I go to School in the mornig
(morning)

and Sometimes wen I get home I
(when)

make a Snowman. and wen Erevey
(whenever)

I came in I have hot cow cow
(come) (cocoa)

and wen I drink my hot cow cow
(when) (cocoa)

I wac T.V. and Then I go Bake
(watch) (back)

out Siad.
(outside)

The Little Bird That I helped.

Once I fiwnd a Little bird on the ground
(found)

I picked It up He fell down and His wing

brok. I hleped Him up and put Him on my
(broke) (helped)

arm. I went in side and got some water

and some bred. and wen I got ther He
(bread) (when) (there)
was died so I made a funral in my
(dead) (funeral)

back yread I was crying at the funral.
(yard) (funeral)

I stad next to my mom. Then the funral
(stayed) (funeral)

was over and everybody left aesape me I
(except)

opened the box and Haged the bird.
(hugged)

Then He Jumep out of my Hands
(jumped)

and flew away. so I went to get

my mom and She said good so we

had a party for Him. The bird

came in the window and we yelled

sekprise. Then I went to bed.
(surprise)

In addition to daily journals and story writing in shape books once or twice each week, students write monthly letters to first grade pen pals at another school, and letters to their parents.

The writing component of the program teaches letter-sound correspondence in a meaningful, functional context in an individualized way. The students become fluent, prolific writers.

Literature

Stories are read and discussed daily. This practice enhances listening ability, teaches story structure necessary for reading comprehension, enhances topic and experiential knowledge, promotes thinking skills, and enhances speaking skills through discussion and memory skills through retelling and responding to questions. These are basic strategies for promoting reading comprehension. Students sit on the floor, facing the teacher. The teacher holds the book so the students can see the words and illustrations. There is always a post reading discussion that emphasizes higher order thinking skills. The teacher asks what the students like most about the book and what they like least about the book, requiring critical thinking. We discuss the characters' actions in terms of cause and effect, demanding convergent thinking. We explore what might have happened if a character had acted differently or an event had not occurred, stimulating divergent thinking. We discuss the problem and its solution, dealing with the structure of story and the author's devices.

The post reading discussion enables the teacher to ask probing questions which help expand students' thinking. If a story has a strong sequence of events we take the opportunity to recall it in order. We work on retelling by summarizing the main points of the story as preparation for individually written summaries. The discussion enables students to ask the teacher why certain things happen in the story. In addition, it encourages the students need

to listen, to concentrate, and to learn to participate.

With some stories, a reading-thinking strategy, adapted from the DRTA (Stauffer, 1970) is used. After the introductory section is read the children are asked to make oral predictions about the story. The question asked is, "What do you think will happen?" Reading to confirm predictions (Hammond, 1983) increases the group's level of involvement and understanding.

Reading Commercial Text Material

Between the eighth and twelfth weeks of the school year, group experience stories, the primary instructional text, are supplemented by published books containing meaningful stories (Reading Unlimited, 1976). These books are introduced as students become secure readers of group stories in need of an increased level of challenge and strategies that facilitate independent reading. The teacher reads the book as the students follow silently in their copies. Then we read the story as a group, several times. Students quickly volunteer to read themselves. When they falter, they are instructed to read to the end of the sentence, return to the unknown word, and make the sentence make sense. As the students become more fluent they are instructed to make sense in terms of the beginning sound of the unknown word. Gradually, final and medial graphophonic cues are added to the strategy. The objective is to enable the children to become independent decoders.

This method combines the sense of the sentence (semantics and syntax) with graphophonics. The phonic instruction takes place in a meaningful context, in response to individual need, and in a situation that facilitates application. It enables students to apply their knowledge of letter-sound correspondence learned in context and in response to individual need in the writing process.

At times, a brief discussion of a word family may follow the reading. A known phonogram is used to generate new words by changing the initial consonant or consonant blend. This process bridges from the known to the new (Clark and Haviland, 1977) in a context which again, facilitates application.

As students become successful, the method of introduction to a new story changes. When a story is assigned, one of the students reads the title to the group. Then each reader has an opportunity to predict what the story is about. The predictions are shared with the group. When the title is not a good enough clue, we read the first paragraph or two before making predictions. Then the students leave the reading table to read the book silently. When they have read it individually, they may work with another child in the group, reading orally to each other and discussing the book. The children return to the reading table for the post reading discussion which follows the format described in the Literature section above. Oral reading of sections of the text is used to clarify answers to questions or points made in the discussion. If the

discussion of story content and concepts indicates comprehension difficulties, the entire story is read aloud with discussion and clarification during and following the oral rereading. As the children progress, oral post reading discussion and questioning may be followed by written responses to teacher-made questions or by written summaries of the story. When children can summarize stories orally and can write their ideas fluently, written summaries become the next step.

As each group progresses the teacher finds multiple copies of meaningful, appropriately challenging texts usually at first and second grade levels. Any basal reader or supplementary reading series containing predictable text may be used. Because the approach to reading is meaning-seeking behavior, the children can read from any book in which the text makes sense.

Trade Books

A large classroom library of easy-to-read and beginner books is available. Early in the year, the students are expected to look through at least one each day. When feasible, they are expected to read one each day. Frequently, a silent reading session is held when everyone reads a trade book individually, but students love to read these books cooperatively.

Each week the class visits the school's Media Center to select books to take home and read with their parents. Repetitive reading

is encouraged. Students frequently learn to read a book fluently following repeated readings.

All students are encouraged to become independent readers through the practice of permitting any child who has mastered a trade book to read it to the class. Once a student who has practiced an old favorite with a parent reads it to the group, others follow quickly. Having a peer read to the class is a great incentive. As reading ability develops, the students read library books to the class after a week's practice at home. It is a source of great pride and enhances feelings of self worth when a first grader reads a book to the class.

Cooperative Strategies

Some activities are enhanced by having fifth graders act as facilitators. Each reading group has several opportunities to work with a fifth grade student helper to write the narrative and dialogue to a wordless picture book. The fifth grader serves as a moderator and recorder. At the completion of the project the group reads their story to the class as the illustrations are displayed.

In May, first graders work one-on-one with fifth graders to become animal experts by doing research projects. Each first grader chooses an animal from a list of those that can be seen at a nearby zoo. Questions about the animals are generated in class discussion. Fifth graders help first graders find reference material in the

Media Center and read it with them. It is the first graders' responsibility to write the answers to the questions and to report to the class. The culmination of the project is a trip to the zoo which, in turn, provides many opportunities for writing experiences.

Program Management

A major operational premise of the program is that students are responsible for their own work and progress. Language activities are structured so that the students know the expectations. Each student is expected to progress at an individual pace. After the first four to six weeks, when most activity is teacher directed and supported, the students learn the routine and procedures and are free to complete their assigned tasks. Keeping the format essentially the same frees the students to concentrate on the substance and to feel secure. Positive reinforcement from the teacher is continuous.

The first few weeks, while the teacher works at the table with a group, the other students practice reading their experience story with each other. At the table, the reading group routine is followed with each group in succession. Before the group leaves the table, the sentence to be written is underlined. When the students return to their seats they write the assigned sentence. By the time the teacher has met with each group, the handwriting copying task has been completed by the students in the first group. The teacher

works with each student individually to listen to the sentence read and provide instruction in letter formation, word spacing, and sentence arrangement on the page. Sometimes additional brief practice is assigned.

During the reading group/writing practice time the students have been reading their experience stories and/or reading books and writing sentences from the story. In addition, they have been writing in their journals, reading in trade books, and working at Center Activities. The Center Activities range from arranging pictures in sequence (later in the year, sentences are placed in sequence) to listening to a story while following the text at the listening post, learning to tell time, sorting objects by common characteristics, math games, painting pictures, or doing special holiday related projects to name a few. The room hums with productive learners who check the blackboard frequently to see what other activities they are expected to complete, then proceed accordingly. The students are motivated and self-directed.

An important aspect of program management is providing common learning experiences to promote concept development and stimulation for the group stories. Brief units of study are designed and whenever possible a field trip accompanies the unit. Units studied are: Trees, Leaves, Forest Life in Autumn, Bees, Plant Growth and Autumn, Halloween, Native Americans/Woodland Indians, Maple Syrup, Zoo Animals, Christopher Columbus, Thanksgiving, Weather, Christmas

in Other Countries, Flight and Airplanes, Rockets and Space, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Australian Animals, Easter, Dinosaurs, and favorite authors, e.g., Tomie de Paula and Arnold Lobel.

Conclusion

Learning to read and write in a whole language classroom is exciting for the students, satisfying for the parents, and gratifying for the teacher. The components of the curriculum are learned in the classroom during the school day. The parents are asked to support their children's progress by listening to the experience stories as the story papers go home each week, reviewing the writing papers the students bring home each day, listening to their children read the stories they write in their shape books, reading the weekly library books to their children, helping them read the books when they are ready, and reading to their children whenever possible and as much as possible.

The program promotes and supports individual, developmental progress within an open-ended, self-directed, comprehensive curriculum. Reading/writing acquisition is fun when it is meaningful and functional. The teacher must orchestrate the program and meet each student's needs through direct instruction. The whole language curriculum is the framework within which this instruction provides a meaningful introduction to literacy.

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